

Mexican American Preschoolers Create Stories: Sociodramatic Play in a Dual Language Classroom

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Abstract

This article describes partial findings of a microethnographic study that focused on the use of language functions and cultural knowledge displayed during sociodramatic play in a pre-kindergarten classroom. The study was conducted at a public elementary school in a small rural community of south central Texas that offers a dual language program from pre-kindergarten to fifth grade. Twelve Mexican American children, seven boys and five girls (4- and 5-year-olds) participated in the study. Data were collected for eight weeks through videotaped observations of free play in the housekeeping and block center. Field notes and a reflexive diary were included as methods of data collection. The children's parents were interviewed to determine the cultural traits that emerged in the children's play. A total of 25 hours of videotaped sociodramatic play episodes was collected. The article illustrates the stories Mexican American children created while engaged in sociodramatic play in a preschool classroom where play was the focus of the curriculum.

The 1960s was a time during which terms for minority children such as "culturally disadvantaged" or "culturally deprived" emerged. Such terms, as Valencia (1997) states, originate from the notion of deficit thinking, which is equal to the process of "blaming the victim." The deficit thinking paradigm posits that students who fail in school do so because of alleged internal deficiencies such as cognitive and/or motivational limitations or shortcomings socially linked to the child, such as familial deficits and dysfunctions. Cultural deficit theory claims that persistent poverty creates cognitive deprivation, ignorance, and low aspirations. However, as Delgado-Gaitán (1994) notes, poverty does not necessarily disable parents or children from normal mental and social capacities. García Coll, Lamberty, Jenkins, McAdoo, Crnic, Waski, and Vásquez García (1996) contend that such deficit models document how minority children compare unfavorably with White children, and, therefore, tend to depict minority children as being abnormal or incompetent. Furthermore, the primary language of minority children has also been considered a hindrance for active performance in the classroom (Escobedo, 1993). Although some scholars disapprove of the deficit thinking model, it is still prevalent in our nation today, in that new terms for minority children such as "at risk" (Valencia, 1997) continue to evolve and blame the students, their families, and their culture for their academic failure. Many contemporary

scholars believe that deficit models are based on ignorance, classism, racism, sexism, and methodologically flawed research (García Coll et al., 1996; Valencia, 1997), which has serious consequences in the lives and development of minority children.

Deficit thinking theories not only involve academic performance and language, but they also extend to children's play, particularly to sociodramatic play. Sociodramatic play is defined by Hughes (1995) as a "form of pretend play that involves intense group interaction, with each group member taking a role that complements the roles played by all others in the group" (p. 230). Smilansky (1968, 1990) states that sociodramatic play contributes to the development of creativity, intellectual growth, social skills, and language development. Garvey (1990) states that sociodramatic play appears to contribute to cognitive and social development and is greatly influenced by the home environment and the child's age. Garvey also notes that socio-dramatic play varies across cultures.

In recent years there has been some controversy regarding whether children from low-income homes have deficits in sociodramatic play or simply exhibit differences in play (Rettig, 1995). According to Rettig, interest in this topic is due, in part, to Smilansky's 1968 work in which she indicated that children who lived in low socioeconomic status (SES) homes in Israel displayed lower levels of sociodramatic play than did middle-class children. Sutton-Smith (1983) notes that it was Smilansky's book, *The Effects of Sociodramatic Play on Disadvantaged Preschool Children* (based on observations of Israeli children), that brought attention to the issue of play differences in the United States.

Johnson, Christie, and Yawkey (1987), Smilansky (1968), and other researchers influenced by her work, have characterized the pretend play of "economically disadvantaged" children as less frequent and of lower quality when compared to that of middle-class children. Poidevant and Spruill (1993), for example, found deficiencies among children who were identified as "at risk." "At-risk" children, according to these authors, experience school failure because of a wide range of personal, familial, or academic circumstances. Children who are often classified as "economically disadvantaged" and "at risk" in the United States come from minority groups such as African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Native Americans. Typically, descriptions of minority children's play include adjectives like unimaginative, repetitive, simplistic, disconnected, dependent on objects, and concrete. Johnson et al. mention that these terms are not far removed from the kinds of qualifiers that have applied to the play of mentally retarded or autistic young children.

Research studies that compare and contrast minority children's play behaviors to those of children in the majority culture or in diverse ethnic groups run the risk of disseminating value judgments. Inevitably, a deficit interpretation will be afforded to one group when another group is used as the

“yardstick” comparison (Soto & Negrón, 1994). The assumption, according to Soto and Negrón, is that the group that serves as the norm is usually from the majority culture. Udwin and Schmukler (1981) issue a stern warning to researchers regarding the tendency to generalize from White middle-class (Anglo American) samples to samples in other cultural or ethnic groups, particularly on issues of language and culture. McLoyd (1983) maintains that understanding the internal logic of the social or cultural environment within which pretend play functions is far more important, theoretically, than knowing whether certain groups engage in more or less pretend play.

The literature, however, does not indicate that substantial research has been conducted specifically with Mexican American children in the area of sociodramatic play in public school classrooms. Some research examples that observed Mexican American children during sociodramatic play, but not necessarily in a public school setting, include Christman (1979), Genishi and Galvan (1983), and Trueba and Delgado-Gaitán (1985). Christman (1979) employed a quasi-experimental static-group design in which the Smilansky (1968) scale was used as an observational instrument to rate the sociodramatic play of Mexican American preschoolers. Frequencies were calculated to determine the amount, age, and gender differences and variety of sociodramatic play behavior. ANOVA was employed for comparing and determining interaction effects on age, gender, and play groupings. Based on the researcher’s analysis, the following findings were reported. Mexican American migrant children’s overall level of play was classified as low, as determined by the Smilansky scale. The researcher found that females engaged in higher level of play than males ($p < .02$). However, in the descriptive analysis these differences were evident only for the 3-year-olds. Nevertheless, for both females and males, there were age differences in the level of play ($p < .02$).

Weaknesses of this study are apparent. The researcher employed the Smilansky scale that had been developed for use with low-income Israeli children and, thus, may be culturally inappropriate. The treatment consisted of predetermined play equipment in a structured play setting that may also lack cultural relevance for the Mexican American migrant children in this study. Lastly, there was no comparison group in which children were freely allowed to engage in sociodramatic play. The latter two ethnographic studies (Genishi & Galván; Trueba & Delgado-Gaitán), rather than disseminating value judgments, described how the children engaged in sociodramatic play. Such explanations created a very different picture of the type of sociodramatic play among Mexican American children. Mexican American children’s play was described as more elaborate and imaginative. Through ethnography the researchers were able to observe interactions, actions, and statements of the children (Zaharlick, 1992).

The argument that can be made with such limited research is that deficit theories of play do not have a strong research-based foundation. In addition, we know little, if any, knowledge about the way children engage

in sociodramatic play in public school classrooms. Therefore, further research regarding the sociodramatic play of Mexican American children in public schools is needed.

Since knowing whether children engage in more or less play does not appear to be important, what can we learn about children through their sociodramatic play episodes? There are two paramount factors that arise when children engage in a sociodramatic play episode.¹

First, as children organize for this episode, they use language. For example, children have to use the appropriate vocabulary and functions of language such as statements, questions, commands, and give-and-see information, in order for sociodramatic play to develop and be sustained. Some researchers like Pellegrini (1986) consider the language used by children during a sociodramatic play episode as part of the register that is required of children in school. Pellegrini identifies this formal register as school language or literate use of language. School language is also referred to as literate language in the sense that there are certain characteristics displayed in the sociodramatic play dialogue that can also be found in school-related tasks such as sequence of events, storytelling, giving and seeking information, questions, statements, commands, and requests, among others. In addition, in the case of bilingual Mexican American children, several language patterns may be chosen, including Spanish, English, or code switching, to generate and continue the sociodramatic play episode. The second factor includes the shared knowledge that the participants in sociodramatic play must have in order to maintain the play episode. The shared knowledge includes knowing about cultural elements common to the children who are participating in the sociodramatic play episode. Cultural patterns or traits have been known to emerge in the themes and characters chosen by the children (Genishi & Galván, 1983; Heath, 1983; Michaels, 1986; Delgado-Gaitán & Trueba, 1991). Thus, language use and shared knowledge during sociodramatic play appear to be essential in order for children to exhibit their cultural and linguistic repertoires.

Although research in the development of children indicates the need for children to play (Piaget, 1962; Rogers & Sawyers, 1988; Smilansky, 1990; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997), this is not often the case for Mexican American children in the early grades. Mexican American children are often placed in classrooms where the implementation of skills, drills, and memorization curricula is the norm (Escobedo, 1993). Many teachers see play in the learning centers as an activity disconnected from academics. For instance, Riojas (1997, 2000) found that preschool children were “allowed” to go to the learning centers only if they finished their “work,” which consisted mostly of coloring, cutting, and pasting activities. Furthermore, a prevalent activity in many pre-kindergarten classrooms is direct teaching during “circle time” (Riojas, 1997, 2000). Direct teaching focuses on a teacher-centered curriculum rather than a child-centered curriculum. In a teacher-centered curriculum,

teachers often believe that they need to disseminate knowledge to their students in order for them (the children) to acquire the readiness skills required for kindergarten. For Mexican American preschool children, whether they are English speaking, Spanish speaking, or bilingual, the focus of the curriculum has been oral language development in English because teachers often believe that the children “lack language skills.” This assumption, along with the inability of some teachers to properly identify preschoolers’ level of language skills (e.g., articulation, vocabulary, fluency, etc.), often become the foundation for the teachers’ low expectations.

Even though the teachers may not be aware of the deficit thinking theories, their low expectations reinforce deficit models of language and play and appear to create a gap in the education of Mexican American children. This gap refers to the lack of opportunities to engage in pretense and exploration with language that occurs through free play in the classroom. Pretense and exploration allow children to practice problem-solving skills that will be needed in the development of reading and mathematical concepts or cognitive development.

Gonzalez, Moll, Floyd-Tenery, Rivera, Rendón, Gonzáles, and Amanti (1995) indicate that the focus of educational institutions has been on what minority students lack in terms of language and knowledge or what is commonly known as disadvantages. The problem found in the classrooms that I observed and evaluated in south and central Texas as a researcher (Riojas, 1996; 2000) and consultant (Riojas, 1997) was that teachers agreed that many minority children lacked the oral language skills in the first and second language. Although this statement was unanimous, some of the teachers could not explain what they meant by the phrase “lacking language skills” and how they knew that children were lacking those language skills. In addition, these teachers appeared to dominate the classroom talk, which usually discriminates against children whose culture is other than the dominant one (Piper, 1998).

The Study

The question that guided this microethnographic study was, what can educators learn about the language of Mexican American children during sociodramatic play? The existing literature on play, language, and culture (Tough, 1976; Genishi & Galván, 1983; McTear, 1985, Garvey, 1990; and Pinnell, 1996) was used as a premise for the study. This article will only focus on the stories or scripts of the preschoolers’ sociodramatic play episodes.

Ethnographic methods were used for this study since I wanted to give voice to Mexican American children by describing for educators the occurrences of the early childhood culture in a public preschool classroom. The principal sources of data included videotaped observations, written field notes, a field diary, and informal interviews with the children’s parents. The interviews were conducted to identify the cultural elements.

Before beginning data collection, I spent two months at the elementary school observing two pre-kindergarten classrooms four days a week during the morning session of the district's half-day pre-kindergarten program. I wanted the children and the teachers to become accustomed to having me in the classroom. It was important for me to get to know the classroom routine, the teacher's teaching style, and the children's interactions in the learning centers in order to know how and when the videotaping was going to occur. One classroom was chosen for the study.²

Data were collected in a half-day dual language pre-kindergarten classroom four days a week for eight weeks. I videotaped the children during "free play" or "center time" for an average of 45 minutes daily. "Free play" time is the time during the day when the children play in learning centers of their choice. Free play time encourages different types of play such as solitary play, parallel play, and cooperative play, also known as sociodramatic play (Cowe, 1982). I chose which learning center to videotape depending on the development of sociodramatic play episodes, although I had initially chosen to observe in the housekeeping and block centers. Sometimes, however, children did not want to play in either the housekeeping or block centers, so I would videotape them in other centers like the creative arts center and even in the large circle area as long as the episode could be classified as sociodramatic play. There were periods of time that the children wanted to be videotaped and they would call me to observe their play using their favorite phrase, "You can camera us, Miss Mari." Circle time and story time were also videotaped.

The data from field notes and videotaped transcriptions were analyzed for patterns and then color coded (Miles & Huberman, 1994) for children's language and family cultural elements during interactions in sociodramatic play in the housekeeping and block centers. The field notes, videotaped transcriptions, and journal entries were analyzed together for cross-reference purposes or triangulation (Patton, 1990). The three types of data (videotaped observations, written field notes, and reflective diary) enhanced the trustworthiness of the study. Patterns found in the study provided a type of reliability in ethnographic research (Fetterman, 1989).

The Setting

The study was conducted at Manuel Rodríguez Elementary School in Mart Town, a small rural community known for its diversified agriculture, such as cotton, peanuts, corn, and honey. Located 55 miles southwest of River Town and in close proximity to the Mexican border, Mart Town has a population of about 7,386 (2,400 of which are students in the Mart Independent School District). Four campuses house the students in the school district, and they include Manuel Rodríguez Elementary (pre-K-2), Mart Intermediate (3-5), Mart Jr. High (6-8), and Mart High School (9-12).

Approximately two-thirds of the school district's population is economically disadvantaged, and one-third is limited English proficient (LEP). The ethnic breakdown of the district is 86% Hispanic (mostly Mexican Americans), 13% White, and 1% other. The district is known for its state-recognized dual language/two-way enhancement program (pre-K-5).

The Teacher

The classroom teacher, whom I call Mrs. Dulce, was born and reared in a rural town about 40 miles south of Mart Town. She attended segregated schools as a young child and was denied the opportunity to speak in her native language, Spanish, at school. Although she had to confront such negative experiences, Mrs. Dulce asserted that she always liked school, especially reading. She developed her affection for reading from one of her teachers. After years of hard work, Mrs. Dulce obtained her associate's degree in child development and then a bachelor's degree in elementary education. Her teaching experience began in Chicago in the 1960s when she worked with minority children in the head start program. Mrs. Dulce is a fully certified bilingual teacher with over 30 years of experience in bilingual and early childhood education. Now, Mrs. Dulce has a master's degree in reading.

Mrs. Dulce's ideas about early childhood were based on the philosophy of child development. She strongly believed that young children need nurturing to develop emotionally and physically. Besides Mrs. Dulce's concern for the children's social and emotional well being, she was concerned about her students' academic well being. Mrs. Dulce believed that children learn through play. She scheduled 45 minutes to one hour of free play in the learning centers every day, except for Mondays, because the children had library time. Mrs. Dulce shared that, "If it was up to me, I would let the children play in the learning centers longer," like she used to when she worked in head start. However, she had to follow the routine that other teachers followed, which was to have the children in the traditional three rotation groups that included the teacher group, the aide group, and an independent group.

The teacher emphasized the use of Spanish, since the classroom was part of the district's dual language program. Using the pre-Language Assessment Scale, or pre-LAS, and the Home Language Survey, 11 children in the classroom were identified as English dominant and one as Spanish dominant. Mart Independent School District uses the pre-LAS as a pre-measure for language identification. Although the test scores indicated that the children were English dominant, the scores on the Spanish pre-LAS indicated that the children had some Spanish proficiency. For Mrs. Dulce, all the children were dominant English speakers except for Bruce, a Puerto Rican boy. She did consider children like Selena, Estrella, Valerie, and Tommy

as limited bilinguals. All the parents considered themselves bilinguals, with some labeling their Spanish “incorrect” or “Tex Mex,” and all except for one considered their children English dominant, but wanted vehemently for them to maintain Spanish. They hoped that the dual language program would fulfill this wish.

Findings

One of the major findings in this study was that when Mexican American children had the opportunity to engage in sociodramatic play, the richness of their language was revealed in their play. This finding contradicts Christman’s (1979) study of Mexican American migrant children and refutes the notion of deficit thinking that young Mexican American children “lack language skills” and that their play is unsophisticated. Although the children’s interactions were in English, they displayed their literate language using their culture as a premise, as their funds of knowledge (Riojas-Cortez, in press). The children were also able to establish better relationships, which helps them in the development of collaboration. Furthermore, the stories created from personal experiences aid children in the enhancement of literacy skills. Such experiences are the foundation needed to be successful in the primary grades. As the preschoolers in this study participated in sociodramatic play, they learned to establish better relationships with each other, to solve problems with their imagination, and expand their language.

Mrs. Dulce’s students had the language skills to develop the story line or the narrative for the scripts of sociodramatic play episodes. This aspect is the “dramatic” aspect of sociodramatic play, according to Sachs, Goldman, and Chaillé (1985). The second aspect that Sachs et al. note is the social aspect of sociodramatic play known as communicative competence. Mrs. Dulce’s preschoolers were able to convey ideas to one another and come to agreement about what needed to be done in the sociodramatic play episode. It appears that the communicative competence is better displayed when children engage in pretense situations.

As children created stories during sociodramatic play, they learned to use different functions of language such as sequence of events. The creation or elaboration of a story line is related to literate language that is required of children in school. Literate language includes sequence of events, storytelling, giving and seeking information, questions, statements, commands, and requests (Pellegrini & Galda, 1985).

In the following language excerpt, Tommy, Valerie, Selena, and Esmeralda were playing together in the housekeeping center, or *La Casita*, and block center. The block center was grandma’s house. Selena was the grandmother, Valerie the mother, Esmeralda the daughter, and Tommy the son. The reason that the children were playing simultaneously in both centers was because there were only supposed to be three children in one center at a time

and there were already three in *La Casita*. Since Selena wanted to be the grandmother, she “had to” live separately from the rest of the children, but Tommy wanted to have the house ready for grandma’s visit:

Tommy: Well, I need to clean up before grandma comes up and see her, so she wants to see her birthday party.

Valerie: No, she’s not coming.

Tommy: She is coming; she’s coming today; she is gonna eat her birth cake! [with emotion]

Valerie: She’s moving.

Tommy: She is? She is not moving.

Valerie: Yes she is [putting her hand on his shoulder]. Call her and see, go over there; let’s go over there.

Valerie: Right, you’re moving?

Selena: Yes.

Tommy: No, she’s not.

The plot of the story was that the grandma was moving to another town; therefore, she could not attend the birthday party that Tommy had planned for her. The functions of language used were providing information and clarification. Although Tommy did not accept that grandma was moving, she did, and that move terminated the sociodramatic play episode and the story. The literate behavior displayed in the dialogue included the conflict that developed due to grandma’s actions, which can be identified as sequence of events. The cultural element that was displayed in this excerpt includes the affection for the extended family. When talking to Tommy’s father I discovered that “grandma” was a key attachment figure in his [Tommy’s] life.

Another story that was also created by Tommy had for a plot making a phone call to 911. Tommy used his imagination to create a fictional story based on a real life experience. Bruce helped Tommy with the story’s narrative by asking questions. The sociodramatic play dialogue was conducted in the following manner:

Tommy: [on the phone] Yeah? Officer Cangent, I need you over here because there’s somebody in the back of the house that’s trying to get inside the house; we have everything all locked but he’s trying to get in but he’s trying and, but, he’s up on the roof and we don’t have no lock to lock the roof, and he’s breaking in with his foot stepping on it. You see officer, he’s on top of the roof. I need you to come over here immediately.

Bruce: Better hurry.

Tommy’s story included characters, setting, and action. The narrative presents a cause and effect relationship as the “man” tries to enter the house through the “unlocked roof.” In addition, Tommy found the solution to

his problem by calling the police. Bruce extended the narrative by indicating that the police must take action. The episode continued as Tommy made a second phone call to the police

Tommy: 9-1-1 Hello? Officer Cangent? *Este* my dad *este* daddy and my little sister keeps messing it up, yes, Officer Cangent. Yeah, okay you coming? Alright, Take the, take your car and your truck, yeah, bye.

Bruce: What does he say to you?

Tommy: He said they were coming already. They were already on their way.

Bruce: Who's on the roof? A bad guy?

Tommy: Yes, but he tried to get into the house and he's not allowed inside the house.

Tommy made a second phone call because "Officer Cangent" had not arrived. The language that Tommy used included asking questions and making suggestions.

Additionally, Bruce's questions allowed for Tommy to clarify the status of the 911 call. Tommy's dialogue was structured to display literate behavior particularly when he answered Bruce's questions. Tommy was able to follow a sequence of events. The literate behavior occurred from the beginning when he made the first phone call to the end, as he explained to Bruce why the "man" should not have been trying to get inside the house.³

The stories that children told during sociodramatic play contained the necessary elements to develop a story. First, they had a beginning, middle, and an end; and second, they included characters, a setting, and a plot. Most of the time the children were the characters in the stories, and other times, like in the episode mentioned above, the children included imaginary characters like "Officer Cangent" in their narratives.

The children's dialogue during sociodramatic play reflected the classifications of language, such as reporting on present and past experiences, logical reasoning, predicting, projecting, and imagining. Some of the stories the children created required problem-solving skills. Problem solving situations require negotiation and agreement. Others made reference to sequence of events such as when children role played taking a trip. In most of the stories, children used descriptive language that included adjectives about specific objects or situations, and verbs to specify behavior, as when children were pretending to do homework or visit a friend's house. Also, the stories reflected cause and effect relationships such as when the children role played preparing for Christmas or going to work. Problem solving and cause and effect relationships are two skills that are heavily emphasized in the early grades in order to prepare the children for the state-mandated Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) tests.

Conclusion/Implications

The way children engaged in sociodramatic play provides a naturalistic picture of the linguistic and cultural repertoires that Mexican American children possess. When the children's linguistic and cultural worlds (Goodwin, 1997) are ignored, the deficit model of play and language of minority children remains. Play provides children the avenue to express the linguistic abilities that are necessary for active classroom participation. For young Mexican American children in preschool, the internal deficits have often been identified as the lack of language skills (Moll, 1988; Gonzalez et al., 1995) not only in both languages but also within each language. The problem may be that some teachers do not know how to identify the language skills that presumably most children lack.

In Mrs. Dulce's classroom sociodramatic play was used as a medium to motivate children to develop and exercise their language skills. She was cognizant that children's oral skills had to be developed in order to succeed in school. The results of the study show that Mexican American children, when given the opportunity to engage in sociodramatic play, can display different language functions that are needed for the development of early literacy skills and which encompass their cognitive development. These preschoolers were able to create elaborate monologues and dialogue in their native language and in some cases the second language. The findings refute the deficit thinking notions of play and language of Mexican American preschoolers, because they show how the children used their funds of knowledge to create elaborate sociodramatic play episodes. In other words, the "blueprints" or scripts used to create sociodramatic play episodes were patterned after their cultural knowledge.

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Endnotes

¹ For the purpose of this study, play episodes encompass a period of time (usually 10 minutes or more) in which two or more children join in pretense with a specific theme. Most language samples reflect portions or segments of the episodes.

² One of the classrooms did not meet the required criteria; the teacher did not allot time for “Free Play.” The classroom was teacher-centered or teacher directed.

³ For more information on this language sample, please see Riojas-Cortez, (in press).